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The Lay of the Last Minstrel and Improvisatory Authorship

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Scott's first long verse romance, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), must have struck early readers as wholly novel and yet comfortably familiar. By this time, a 'minstrelsy complex' had 'moved beyond its origins in antiquarian polemic to take up residence within the heart of poetry and poetics', as Maureen N. McLane has observed.¹ Thomas Gray's *The Bard* (1757) and James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771-74), among many poems that focused on British bardic figures, were still being widely reprinted and imitated. Along with many aspiring poets of the period, Scott had been an avid student of Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) since his youth (from the age of twelve, in his case). So adept at mimicry was Scott as a schoolboy he later recalled with unrelenting anger an old blue-buskined wife accusing him of plagiarising 'my sweet poetry'.² Like all apprentice poets, he casually reminds us, he had

¹ Maureen McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 144, 151-52. For extended accounts of improvisation in the period see Erik Simpson, *Literary Minstrelsy, 1770-1830: Minstrels and Improvisers in British, Irish, and American Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and Angela Esterhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

² 'Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad', in *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, 12 vols (Edinburgh: Printed for Robert Cadell, 1833), IV, pp. 3-78 (p. 54). Unless stated otherwise, I use this edition for Scott's poetry and prose.

indeed copied out choice words and ideas for later use – a legitimate learning tool misconstrued by his amateur critic as outright theft.

As Susan Stewart has suggested, the *Lay* is not ‘properly a ballad imitation’ but ‘a kind of manifesto, or perhaps parting statement, of the ballad revival spurred by Percy and that revival’s concomitant invention of the minstrel figure’.³ Scott’s speaker, ‘an ancient Minstrel, the last of the race’, has ‘caught somewhat of the refinement of modern poetry, without losing the simplicity of his original model’, or so the poem’s preface claims.⁴ In order to communicate in popular poetry the history of a specific locale, to put it another way, Scott’s *Lay* over-writes an ancient metrical romance in predominately modern dress.⁵ Francis Jeffrey and other commentators particularly enjoyed the passages ‘in which the antient strain is suspended, and the feelings and situations of the minstrel described in the words of the author’.⁶ William Hazlitt, by contrast, unpicks what he calls Scott’s ‘minstrel masquerade’ in a damning assertion that he is to the great poet what an excellent mimic is to a great actor.⁷ More recently, Marlon B. Ross has critiqued Scott’s ‘chivalric pose’, in which the author ‘silences the last minstrel,

³ Susan Stewart, ‘Scandals of the Ballad’, *Representations*, 32 (1990), 134-56 (p. 149).

⁴ Scott, *Poetical Works*, VI, p. 39.

⁵ See Jane Millgate, “‘Naught of the Bridal’”: Narrative Resistance in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*’, *Scottish Literary Journal*, 17.2 (1990), 16-26.

⁶ *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 6 (April 1805), pp. 1-20.

⁷ Quoted in McLane, p. 131.

so that he can take the mantle'.⁸ By putting the *Lay* into the mouth of a character, Peter T. Murphy observes, Scott asserts his authorial self while diffusing it at the same time.⁹

Beyond Scott's headline impersonation of the Last Minstrel, modern readers have identified a further guise in the voice of the scholarly apparatus. For Gillian Hughes, the notes are a vital part of the poem's larger 'new-old' aesthetic. Wearing an 'antiquarian mask', Hughes suggests, Scott revels in supernatural anecdotes and stories often more outlandish than those told in the course of the poem.¹⁰ J. H. Alexander similarly detects in the notes an editorial persona noticeably more sceptical and humane than the minstrel-narrator himself.¹¹ (Perhaps we should treat the scholarly voice in the notes as itself a patchwork of multiple characters, especially the frequently cited Walter Scott of Satchwells, a seventeenth-century genealogist, among others). In addition to heralds and spirits, yet other authorial voices appear in the poem, most obviously the three minstrels who deliver short songs at the wedding feast that is supposed to close the story: Albert Graeme, a simple Border minstrel who sings of love and war; Fitztraver, a courtly harpist who collaborates with the real-life poet Henry Howard, the Earl of

⁸ Marlon Ross, 'Scott's Chivalric Pose: The Function of Metrical Romance in the Romantic Period', *Genre*, 19 (1986), 267-97 (p. 293). See also Beth Lau, 'Authorial Anonymity and Intertextuality: Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, Coleridge, and Keats', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 40 (2014), 116-33.

⁹ Peter T. Murphy, *Poetry as an Occupation and an Art in Britain, 1760-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 146.

¹⁰ Gillian Hughes, 'Picking Virgil? Scott's Notes to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*', *Scottish Literary Review*, 7.2 (2015), 51-62 (p. 58).

¹¹ J. H. Alexander, '*The Lay of the Last Minstrel*': *Three Essays* (Salzburg: Institut für englische Sprache und Literatur, University of Salzburg, 1978), p. 167.

Surrey; and Harold of St Clair, an Orcadian bard who delivers a romantic dirge. More broadly, as Alison Lumsden says, there is an elision of the Last Minstrel's voice and the author's own at the opening and closing of each canto, so that it is not altogether clear whether we as readers are addressed by an early modern bard or a modern author, an experienced improviser of songs or an emergent composer of poems.¹² In this respect, Scott builds on the example of a handful of long narrative poems published in the period that make dramatic capital out of shifts of voice and metre. As early as William Lisle Bowles's 1798 blank-verse poem *Coombe-Ellen*, the speaker summons a 'pale minstrel' to the page with an invocation shaped by an emphatic ballad metre:

Son of the magic song, arise!
And bid the deep-toned lyre
Pour forth its manly melodies,
With eyes on fire.¹³

Working against Scott's Last Minstrel and his impersonated singers, a barely articulate but highly disruptive voice in the *Lay* belongs to Gilpin Horner, a goblin-page appropriated from both oral and written folklore, as Scott repeatedly reminds us in lengthy citations. Entering almost a third of the way into Scott's poem, the goblin-page seeks out a mysterious

¹² Alison Lumsden, *Walter Scott and the Limits of Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 51.

¹³ See Susan Stewart, 'Romantic Meter and Form', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. by James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 53-75 (p. 69).

book of spells that, once won, would allow him to seize control of the plot as it is being told.¹⁴ He is, as Margaret Russett has argued, not merely a reader but also ‘primitively’ a ‘writer who wins his power to deceive by anointing the volume with the blood of an illiterate’, momentarily opening its forbidding iron clasps.¹⁵ For Dino Felluga, the goblin-page epitomizes the paradigmatic shift from a ‘cult of the book’ to a liberating if perilous ‘culture of the text’: whereas a book calls attention to itself as a weighty, ornamented object, text is ‘endlessly reproducible and readily consumable’.¹⁶ Nancy Moore Goslee argues that the *Lay*’s ‘anarchic goblin represents both an author’s imagination escaping all normal restraints and a nightmare vision of the “ideal reader” attracted by such violence’.¹⁷ The goblin-page, for Peter Murphy, fulfils the role of the ‘patron of irregularity’ who ‘runs through the poem disrupting the sense of calm’.¹⁸ I want to extend these claims to suggest the goblin-page represents more specifically the rise of supernatural, wild writing fashionable in the second half of the eighteenth century (including Scott’s translations of Gottfried August Bürger’s demonic balladry and his own

¹⁴ For an excellent in-depth discussion of the book as magic object and as discursive text see Penny Fielding, ‘Black Books: Sedition, Circulation, and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*’, *ELH*, 81.1 (2014), 197-223.

¹⁵ Margaret Russett, *Fictions and Fakes: Forging Romantic Authenticity, 1760-1845* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 169.

¹⁶ Dino Franco Felluga, *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 59.

¹⁷ Nancy Moore Goslee, *Scott the Rhymers* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), pp. 18-40 (p. 20).

¹⁸ Murphy, p. 170.

efforts for Matthew Gregory Lewis's somewhat maligned *Tales of Wonder* [1801]), against the ancient, hard-won improvisatory skills of the Last Minstrel and his poetic brethren.

When writing to Lady Dalkeith, who had commissioned a poetic retelling of the curious folk tale of Gilpin Horner, Scott conceded that the poem 'has drawn itself out to such a length that it cannot be received into the 3rd vol. of the *Minstrelsy*'.¹⁹ The *Lay*, in other words, spilled out of Scott's ever-expanding *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3), where he had been attempting to impose order on the common stock of popular poetry in the region. In *Minstrelsy* he divides the contents into three broad categories: historical ballads, which largely uphold martial and patriotic ideals; romantic ballads, which rely on wild, supernatural, or sentimental elements and erode the morality underpinning chivalric ideals; and imitation ballads, in which he seeks to reverse what he perceives to be the debauchery of the 'romantic' style.²⁰ In what follows I want to trace what only superficially appear to be contradictions in the improvisatory authorship of the *Lay*. Scott seeks to dramatize in a modern printed poem anchored by historical notes the spontaneous and occasional remit of traditional minstrelsy. The story itself, moreover, turns on actions that are notionally unforeseen (*improvisus*) for an uninitiated reader of romantic ballads.

Scott's Poetical Character: A Retrospective

Seemingly from memory, Scott, through his surrogate compositional voices, refashions while only selectively referencing a range of poetic and scholarly materials, from the a common stock

¹⁹ Quoted in Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown*, 2 vols (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), I, p. 200.

²⁰ See Susan Oliver, *Scott, Byron, and the Poetics of Encounter* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 60-64.

and from the corpora of others, including – controversially – an as-then unpublished but widely recited fragment by Coleridge. Reigning in his plot by the closing of the text, Scott at once asserts his authorial control over the poem as it exists on the page and yet still maintains in a kind of living archive the open-endedness of improvised minstrelsy. As Meredith Martin reminds us, a lay is a transcription of a song, a recording of a performance and therefore a fantasy of communal creating and recreating.²¹ Scott's *Lay* is not merely a poem; as Celeste Langan has demonstrated, it was a prolonged 'media event'.²²

With the copyright of the *Lay* due to run out in 1833, Scott took the opportunity to write an extended introduction in which he could concretize in print an appropriative, collaborative authorship ideal that had been undermined by a fairly downbeat but highly persistent, slow burning plagiarism allegation from which the poem has never really recovered.²³ Whereas in the 1805 edition he merely outlined his aim to illustrate life in the Borders through a modernized impersonation of minstrelsy, in the later introduction (written in April 1830 and revised in the autumn of 1831) he shifts the focus to an account of his burgeoning career in verse and its attendant pitfalls. Quickly noting the popularity of the first edition of *Minstrelsy*, he concedes that the second did not sell well, particularly in England, where, he claims, readers

²¹ Meredith Martin, "'Imperfectly Civilized": Ballads, Nations, and Histories of Form', *ELH*, 82.2 (2015), 345-63 (p. 352).

²² Celeste Langan, 'Understanding Media in 1805: Audiovisual Hallucination in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*', *Studies in Romanticism*, 40.1 (2001), 49-70. See also Peter J. Manning, "'The Birthday of Topography": A Response to Celeste Manning', *Studies in Romanticism*, 40.1 (2001), 71-83, and Nick Bujak, 'The Form of Media History: Narrator-Space and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 54.3 (2014), 697-716.

²³ *Poetical Works*, VI, pp. 5-31.

would have been put off by poems left ‘in the rude garb of antiquity’ and accompanied by obscure notes. More than that, he makes an extraordinary claim about a seeming lack of public interest in balladry: ‘the practice of ballad-writing was for the present out of fashion, and that any attempt to revive it, or to found a poetical character upon it, would certainly fail of success’. ‘The ballad measure itself, which was listened to as to an enchanting melody’, he continues, ‘had become hackneyed and sickening, from its being the accompaniment of every grinding hand-organ’. To please his target audience he considered using the measured short line common in English, but soon conceded that it leads to ‘slovenly’, formulaic composition. Intimidated, as he puts it, he also avoided the octosyllabic verse that, in recent years (and after Scott produced his major verse romances), had been used to great effect by Byron.

Such considerations set us up for an important if quickly dismissed revelation: Scott heard, from his friend John Stoddart, recitations of a handful of unpublished poems by the Lake School poets, including Coleridge’s as-yet unpublished *Christabel* (1816).²⁴ Coleridge, for his part, noted in 1807 that the *Lay* had ‘no dishonourable or avoidable resemblance to *Christabel*’.²⁵ But the appearance in print of Byron’s sideswiping claim that the *Lay* was heavily ‘indebted’ to Coleridge, without whom Scott’s poem ‘would never have been thought of’, forced Scott to respond in some way.²⁶ Among the ‘specimens’ recited by Stoddart, Scott

²⁴ Earl Griggs suggests that Coleridge gave Stoddart a copy of *Christabel*, which the latter recited to Scott in 1802: *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), II, pp. 1191-1202.

²⁵ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, II, p. 1191.

²⁶ Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron: Noted during a residence with his lordship at Pisa, in the years 1821 and 1822*. 2nd edn (London: Henry Colburn, 1824), pp. 249-50.

admits that he was most struck by *Christabel*, noting its appropriateness as a model for an unusual commission with which he had grappling, namely a poetic retelling of a goblin story for Lady Dalkeith: ‘the singularly irregular structure of the stanzas, and the liberty which it allowed the author to adapt the sound to the sense’, Scott writes, ‘seemed to be exactly suited to such an extravaganza as I meditated on the subject of Gilpin Horner’. Openly acknowledging Coleridge’s direct influence as that of ‘the pupil to his master’, Scott nevertheless cagily downplays Coleridge’s proprietary claims over an unfinished work. He lambasts Coleridge for habitually dashing ‘unfinished scraps of poetry’ off his pen, defying the skill of his ‘poetical brethren to complete them’.

Having skirted around the plagiarism allegation, Scott continues what Jane Millgate has called his ‘fable of composition’.²⁷ First, he did not immediately begin ‘my projected labour’ (drawing our attention to the originality of his work). Second, he shared some early stanzas with learned friends who had little to say in response to what they had heard. Scott responded by throwing his manuscript into the fireplace, thereby invoking a common topos in antiquarian editing: the perishable manuscript. Percy, for example, had famously claimed retrieval from a fire of many of the poems he later included in his *Reliques*. More than forty years later, Scott mimics the elusive, textually unstable outpourings of the Coleridgean poet and moves his own work within the stabilising remit of recovered balladry. Taking this further, he announces his friend’s suggestion that he should add Spenserian prologues to explain his work in a pseudo-antiquarian style. After all, Scott tells us, this friend had made little comment on the *Lay* because he had not yet heard ‘a poem so much out of the common road’, another indication of its uniqueness. Scott instead added ‘the Old Minstrel, as an appropriate prolocutor’. Having

²⁷ Jane Millgate, *Walter Scott: The Making of the Novelist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), p. 15.

been vetted by critics as ‘fit for the market’, the poem was soon finished at about the rate of a canto per week. Now the writer, ‘who has been since so voluminous’, could lay claim to be considered ‘an original author’ intensively labouring over his materials.

It is also important to note that the new introduction to the *Lay* is, as Scott mentions towards the beginning, a ‘sequel’ of sorts to two important articles included in a revised edition of *Minstrelsy*: ‘Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry, and on the Various Collections of Ballads in Britain, Particularly those of Scotland’ and ‘Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad’. Traditional balladry has fallen into disrepute, he claims in the first essay, because the popular pieces have congealed into ‘a joint stock for the common use of the profession’.²⁸ Habitual imitation, in this context, undermines the practising poet’s work: lazily appropriating from the worn-out stock makes his immediate task easier but ultimately degrades his art, his value-added labour. Scott extends his treatment of revivifying authorship in ‘Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad’ with an account of his early pieces ‘Glenfinlas’ (a Gaelic imitation) and ‘The Eve of St John’, both of which he treats as poetic experiments that were not entirely successful: ‘I shook hands with criticism, and reduced my ballads back to their original form, stripping them without remorse of those “lendings” which I had adopted at the suggestion of others’.²⁹ These pieces had appeared in Lewis’s *Tales of Wonder*, an anthology of old and new works cruelly dubbed *Tales of Plunder* by parodists. Rather than gloss over this period of his career, Scott instead showcases it as a formative experience by appending extensive extracts from his correspondence with his grumbling editor.³⁰

²⁸ *Poetical Works*, I, pp. 5-91.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, IV, pp. 3-78.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-87.

This establishes a counter-narrative, in which Lewis's treatment of Scott's poems ought to be taken as a decisive influence on his style, in the sense that Scott adopts some of his editor's observations and publicly rejects others. Lewis, for one, favours a traditional ballad metre: 'Observe, that, in the Ballad, I do not always object to a variation of metre; but then it ought to increase the melody, whereas, in my opinion, in these instances [in Scott's poems], it is diminished'. In the *Lay*, Scott largely moves away from the old ballad praised by his editor here and instead employs an irregular rhyme scheme (other than an impersonation of the four-line ballad quatrain within Canto Sixth), though he does use some internal rhyme and repetition. He also varies his prosodic structuring, much more so than Coleridge, from whom he supposedly took his metre. Even though Coleridge didn't explicitly claim in his preface that his metre had been plagiarized, he did insist on the importance of his innovation:

I have only to add that the metre of *Christabel* is not, properly speaking, irregular, though it may seem so from its being founded on a new principle: namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables. Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line the accents will be found to be only four.³¹

One of the most respected bards of the time, Thomas Moore tried to put Coleridge straight: 'the monstrous assurance of any man coming forward coolly at this time of day, and telling the readers of English poetry, whose ear has been tuned to the lays of Spenser, Milton, Dryden,

³¹ As Brennan O'Donnell points out, the weight of the lines vary from 4 to 14 syllables; and not all lines have four stresses. See O'Donnell, 'The "Invention" of a Meter: *Christabel* Meter as Fact and Fiction', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 100.4 (2001), 511-36.

and Pope, that he make his metre ‘on a new principle!’ but we utterly deny the truth of this assertion’.³² Spenser had used a four-stress line for extended passages throughout *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579). Chatterton, Burns, and Blake, more recently, had used accentual metre. In fact, Scott’s *Minstrelsy* is replete with poems running over four-stress lines of anywhere between eight and ten syllables. In the *Lay*, Scott uses an accentual metre in the very opening sections of what is a very long, multifaceted poem, but only occasionally thereafter. Throughout the cantos he flits in an appropriately improvisatory manner between accentual verses, traditional ballad metres, conventional octosyllabic couplets, and even, in the mouth of a sophisticated minstrel, the Spenserian stanza. Furthermore, as P. B. Anderson shows, Scott had used accentual metre far more extensively in ‘St John’ than he does in the *Lay*.³³

So the *Lay* is an extension – and arguably a culmination – of Scott’s prior experimentation with traditional and modern poetics. I now wish to stress some points of influence and reworking across the six cantos of the *Lay*. Sometimes Scott alludes to specific texts, both authored and traditional, for local points of comparison. Elsewhere, he follows the example of others in order to recreate or even unsettle certain expectations. And in other places he attempts to expunge their work from his own as he strives to establish his ‘poetical character’ at the outset of his career.

³² *Edinburgh Review*, 27 (September 1816), 64. Well into the 1830s, however, critics continued to laud the originality of Coleridge’s prosody: ‘Some new form of verse seems wanting to modern poetry’, wrote John Abraham Heraud, ‘and this of Coleridge’s invention might have been generally adopted with advantage’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 10 (Oct 1834), 394.

³³ Anderson, ‘Scott’s *The Eve of St John* and the “Influence” of *Christabel* on *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*’, *Philological Review*, 35.1 (2009), 1-10.

Framing the First Canto

The framing narrative of the *Lay* establishes a decrepit minstrel with a death-wish, compelled – like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* – to keep telling tales:

The last of all the Bards was he,
Who sung of Border chivalry;
For, welladay! their date was fled,
His tuneful brethren all were dead;
And he, neglected and oppress’d,
Wish’d to be with them, and at rest. (Introduction, 7-12)

Scott suggests his songs have grown heavy while also reminding us of their former elegance: ‘No more on prancing palfrey borne, | He caroll’d, light as lark at morn’. Not only does the modern age fail to appreciate his sound, it evinces an egregious prejudice against the ‘harmless art’:

Old times were changed, old manners gone;
A stranger fill’d the Stuarts’ throne;
The bigots of the iron time
Had call’d his harmless art a crime. (Introduction, 19-22)

Formerly adored at court, he has become a ‘wandering Harper, scorn’d and poor’ begging ‘his bread from door to door’, thereby conforming to Joseph Ritson’s depiction of the minstrel figure as a lowly itinerant retelling the degraded wares of others. Gladdened by the kindness of the Duchess and her circle, ‘his minstrel pride’ returns to him as he talks of great earls ‘dead

and gone'.³⁴ However, with the stage set for a revival among a captive audience more suited to Percy's account of the minstrel figure – a professional court poet and dignified inventor of songs – he falters:

For, when to tune his harp he tried,
His trembling hand had lost the ease,
Which marks security to please;
And scenes, long past, of joy and pain,
Came wildering o'er his aged brain –
He tried to tune his harp in vain! (Introduction, 66-81)

Perhaps Scott wanted to confront Percy's and Beattie's naïve praise of song-making in *The Hermit of Warkworth* ('All Minstrels yet that ever I saw, | Are full of game and glee') and *The Minstrel* ('As ever as he went some merry lay he sung'). Or perhaps he had in mind Spenser's celebratory lines in *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96):

And forth he comes into the commune hall,
Where earely waite him many a gazing eye,
To weet what end to straunger knights may fall.
There many Minstrales maken melody,
To driue away the dull melancholy,
And many Bardes, that to the trembling chord

³⁴ For a pertinent discussion of the debate between Percy and Ritson, see McLane, pp. 146-51. See Oliver for a discussion of Scott's literary response to the dispute: pp. 33-38, 53-61.

Can tune their timely voyces cunningly,
And many Chroniclers, that can record
Old loues, and wares for Ladies doen by many a Lord. (I.v.3.1-9)³⁵

Spenser's minstrels appear confident and artful, a standard that Scott's faltering minstrel struggles to achieve. The poise of the narrator's lines in the *Lay* is belied by the intrusion of a triplet (*pain, brain, vain*) within a 100-line proem largely made up of couplets. The variation conveys, and is arguably infected by, the minstrel's fumbling. Elsewhere in the proem Scott uses triplets to similar effect:

When kindness had his wants supplied,
And the old man was gratified,
Began to rise his minstrel pride. [...]

And then, he said, he would full fain
He could recall an ancient strain,
He never thought to sing again. (Introduction, 45-47, 86-88)

These last two examples capture the Last Minstrel's feelings in the moment, whether he is overwhelmed by sudden kindness or toying with the idea of singing a controversial 'long-forgotten melody'. Towards the close of the proem, as we prepare for Canto First, Scott introduces a faulty triplet:

³⁵ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by Thomas P. Roche, Jr (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 92.

Amid the strings his fingers stray'd,
And an uncertain warbling made,
And oft he shook his hoary head. (Introduction, 95-97)

These lines translate the minstrel's oral failures into print: *strayed* and *made* rhyme perfectly well, despite their appearance on the page, whereas *head* is at best a half rhyme. However, at this point the Last Minstrel comes alive in a noticeably Coleridgean manner:

But when he caught the measure wild,
The old man raised his face, and smiled;
And lighten'd up his faded eye
With all a poet's ecstasy! (Introduction, 98-101)

In the authorial narrative outlined in the 1830 introduction to the *Lay*, Scott took pains to state, categorically, that he had not parodied Coleridge. But surely many readers would have seen Scott's Last Minstrel (here, at least) as a potential variation of the enchanted storytellers we find in Coleridge's narrative poems, particularly the glittering-eyed Ancient Mariner, rather than, say, Beattie's 'long-robed minstrels' who will 'mellow breath the martial pipe inspire' or the 'sad eyes' of Gray's wearied bard. Moreover, the opening verse paragraph of Canto First relies heavily on a technique favoured by Coleridge and oral poets alike: incremental repetition. And, in the following lines, it mimics the octosyllabic couplets used in *Christabel*:

The way was long, the wind was cold,
The Minstrel was infirm and old;

His wither'd cheek and tresses gray,
Seem'd to have known a better day;
The harp, his sole remaining joy,
Was carried by an orphan boy. (Introduction, 1-6)

Against, for example, the sprightly opening of Percy's well-known Northumberland ballad *The Hermit of Warkworth*, the leaden, 'limp march of these lines', John Sutherland suggests, aptly captures the minstrel's weariness.³⁶ Soon enough, though, the poem springs into life over lines of varying syllabic length, each with four spread-out, insistent and energetic stresses:

The feast was over in Branksome tower,
And the Ladye had gone to her secret bower;
Her bower that was guarded by word and by spell,
Deadly to hear, and deadly to tell—
Jesu Maria, shield us well!
No living wight, save the Ladye alone,
Had dared to cross the threshold stone. (i.1.1-7)

Not only is this the shortest verse paragraph in the canto (the longest runs over seventeen lines), it is the only one that directly contains a line from Coleridge ('Jesu Maria, shield us well!'), in what amounts to a brief, pointed pastiche of Coleridge's improvisatory, stuttering style ('[...] her secret bower; | Her bower [...]'), claustrophobic use of rhyme in short lines (*spell, tell, well*), and abundant assonance (particularly the open *o* and *ea*). The lifted line is even marked

³⁶ John Sutherland, *The Life of Walter Scott* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 102.

out as a line ‘deadly’ to hear and to tell, perhaps a criticism of the demonization of the poetic voice.

Certainly the second verse paragraph moves abruptly to other imitated voices, that of Spenser and Goldsmith, seemingly in a move to expunge demonic poetics from the page (at this point, at least). Whereas the first paragraph leaves the Ladye in her secret bower, the second remains in the hall:

The tables were drawn, it was idlesse all;

Knight, and page, and household squire,

Loiter’d through the lofty hall,

Or crowded round the ample fire:

The stag-hounds, weary with the chase,

Lay stretch’d upon the rushy floor,

And urged, in dreams, the forest race

From Teviot-stone to Eskdale-moor. (i.2.1-8)

The stanza is sprinkled with Spenserian coinage (‘idlesse’) and an uncommon word used in Goldsmith’s ‘The Hermit, or Edwin and Angelina’ (‘rushy’, as in ‘my rushy couch and frugal fare, | My blessing and repose’). And we move from the couplets of *Christabel* to the alternate rhyming of *The Faerie Queene*, albeit in a far less sophisticated, prolonged execution. More importantly, perhaps, it sets up a Spenserian tone of ‘deepe darkness dred’, particularly in the seemingly banal, descriptive sixth verse paragraph:

Why do these steeds stand ready dight?

Why watch these warriors, arm’d, by night?—

They watch, to hear the blood-hound baying:
 They watch, to hear the war-horn braying;
 To see St. George's red cross streaming,
 To see the midnight beacon gleaming:
 They watch, against Southern force and guile,
 Lest Scroop, or Howard, or Percy's powers,
 Threaten Branksome's lordly towers,
 From Warkworth, or Naworth, or merry Carlisle. (i.6.1-10)

This is the closest we get to a Spenserian stanza in the *Lay's* first canto. A fairly fixed form, discounting for a moment deliberate deviations, the Spenserian stanza contains nine lines in total: eight lines in iambic pentameter followed by a single alexandrine line in iambic hexameter (a-b-a-b-b-c-b-c-c). Here, by contrast, we have ten lines made up of eight or nine syllables each, aside from a final twelve-line alexandrine, rhyming a-a-b-b-c-c-d-e-e-d. Aside from an occasional archaism ('dight'), the diction is thoroughly modern. And Scott's rigidly end-stopped lines here make little attempt to emulate the wavy pattern of caesurae used to such musical effect by Spenser. But the use of an alexandrine and an overzealous reliance on present participle verbs and compound nouns as favoured (but used fairly sparingly) by Spenser ('devouring speare', 'steele-headed'), and the impending threat in the tone, suggest *The Faerie Queene* (particularly the Redcrosse Knight) had a shaping influence on Scott, certainly against the intensive, invasive mimicry of Coleridge at the opening.

One might wonder why Scott adopts the label of an Anglo-Italian canto over the Scottish fytte, bearing in mind his *Minstrelsy* favoured the latter term. After all, the first two cantos of the *Lay* in particular recall the ballads defined as historical and romantic in *Minstrelsy*. As Susan Oliver suggests, the Ladye – Janet Scott of Buccleuch – for one, represents the

‘excessive passion’ along with an effeminized martial tradition that had become associated with ‘romantic’ writing.³⁷ More specifically, Janet’s small son takes us back to the ballad of Johnie Armstrang:

Until, amid his sorrowing clan,

Her son lisp’d from the nurse’s knee—

“And if I live to be a man,

My father’s death reveng’d shall be!”— (i.9.11-13)

With hardly a word altered, these are the concluding lines of the Jacobite song ‘Johnie Armstrong’s Last Good-Night’ published by Joseph Ritson.³⁸ Scott chose not to use these lines in his own version of that ballad in *Minstrelsy*, almost certainly because they fostered revolutionary sentiments.³⁹ In the new context, the *Lay*, Scott sets the scene for a survivor of the revolutions, the Last Minstrel, to refocus our attention on the emotional fallout of war for mothers or lovers. He follows the borrowed lines, and closes the stanza, with a Coleridgean couplet:

Then fast the mother’s tears did seek

To dew the infant’s kindling cheek. (i.9.14-15)

³⁷ Oliver, p. 76.

³⁸ ‘If ever I live to be a man, | My fathers death reveng’d shall be’: Joseph Ritson, *A Select Collection of English Songs*, 3 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1783), II, pp. 322-26.

³⁹ *Poetical Works*, I, pp. 392-413.

By 'Coleridgean' I refer more specifically to a possible borrowing from a spurious sequel that appeared in print, ironically, before *Christabel*:

But now returning beauty warms
Her lips and her kindling cheek so well,
She looks like the lovely Christobell. (23-25)⁴⁰

Or perhaps Scott had a popular line from James Beattie in mind: 'Quick o'er the kindling cheek, the ready blush, | And from the smallest violence to shrink' (*The Seasons*).⁴¹ In any case, Scott liked the phrase as he repurposed it in *Rokeby* (1813): '[...] bended brow, and glance of fire, | And kindling cheek, spoke Erin's ire'. Thomas Moore, too, uses it in 'The Philosopher Aristippus to a Lamp which was given him by Lais' ('And I shall mark her kindling cheek, | Shall see her bosom warmly move'). Scott perhaps does directly borrow from Coleridge at this point in the poem as the line 'burning pride and high disdain' clearly revisits the second part of *Christabel* ('words of high disdain'). The ensuing verse paragraph more faintly mimics Coleridge again in its brevity and repetition ('All loose her negligent attire, | All loose her golden hair'), as well as its rapid rhyming at the close:

⁴⁰ Often attributed to Anna Vardill, the poem was published in the *European Magazine* in April 1815. See Donald H. Reiman, 'Christobell; or, The Case of the Sequel Preemptive', *Wordsworth Circle*, 6.4 (1975), 283-89 (p. 286).

⁴¹ William Scott, a teacher in Edinburgh, included the passage in *Lessons in Elocution* (Dublin: C. Talbot, 1781), p. 271. The passage was also excerpted in the periodical press in such publications as *The Lady's Magazine* and *The Student*.

And well she knew, her mother dread,
Before Lord Cranstoun she should wed,
Would see her on her dying bed.

Of the whole *Lay*, one might suggest, the first canto seems to have the widest array of allusions, largely as a way of establishing the free-ranging, improvisatory tone.

Other borrowings in Canto First seem to rely on knowledge of the common stock of songs. A good example is the seemingly throwaway conclusion to the twenty-seventh verse paragraph – ‘Ambition is no cure for love!’ – which gains more meaning if the reader is familiar with Sir Gilbert Elliot’s song ‘Amynta’ (*The Charmer* [1749]), a favourite at concerts throughout the eighteenth century: ‘No more for Amynta fresh garlands I wove; | For ambition, I said, would soon cure me of love’. A song about regret (‘Oh, what had my youth with ambition to do? | Why left I Amynta? Why broke I my vow?’) and failure (‘moments neglected return not again’) has been used in the *Lay* as a warning to William of Deloraine as he rides, unchallenged, through the borders. Spurning pastoral convention, and arguably Coleridgean enchantment, Scott’s new-old romance seeks new ground:

In bitter mood he spurred fast,
And soon the hated heath was past;
And far beneath, in lustre wan,
Old Melros’ rose, and fair Tweed ran. (i.31.1-4)

Coleridge’s Aeolian harp threatens to stir, but ultimately it meets silence:

The sound, upon the fitful gale,

In solemn wise did rise and fail,
Like that wild harp, whose magic tone
Is waken'd by the winds alone.
But when Melrose he reach'd, 'twas silence all. (i.31.9-13)

A thin black line pierces the page, like the break in a dramatic text, and the Last Minstrel stops, seeking the approval of his audience. Diffident of 'present praise', he instead

spoke of former days,
And how old age, and wand'ring long,
Had done his hand and harp some wrong. (i, Conclusion, 8-10)

Spurning Coleridge's modern poetics and pushing against Elliot's regional pastoral, however much he admired both, Scott suggests the old songs, and the old ways of playing, will remain popular when delivered with an animated, fluid performance. Duly captivated by the Minstrel's talent, the Duchess and her daughters 'long'd the rest to hear'.

Lengthening the Tale

The epilogue to Canto Second, however, suggests the Last Minstrel's overly ambitious, 'lengthened tale' has already drained his talents. This canto takes on a gothic and fantastical turn as we welcome to the page, through an assortment of related vignettes, a series of new characters, including the long-dead Michael Scott, whom we learn in a story told by the solemn Monk of St. Mary's had been an inspiring wizard; the fairest maid of Teviotdale, Margaret; and Lord Cranstoun's goblin-page, who is described as 'waspish, arch, and litherlie', despite his apparent lack of words ('Lost! Lost! Lost!', he mutters). Indeed, the account of the goblin-

page interrupts a mooted love story between Deloraine and Margaret in a standout moment of meta-minstrelsy that provides a miniature version of the unsaid tale along formulaic yet enticing lines:

And now, fair dames, methinks I see
You listen to my minstrelsy; [...]
Ye ween to hear a melting tale,
Of two true lovers in a dale;
And how the Knight, with tender fire,
To paint his faithful passion strove;
Swore he might at her feet expire,
But never, never cease to love;
And how she blush'd, and how she sigh'd,
And, half consenting, half denied,
And said that she would die a maid;—
Yet, might the bloody feud be stay'd,
Henry of Cranstoun, and only he,
Margaret of Branksome's choice should be. (ii.29.1-16)

Over the ensuing four verse paragraphs the minstrel instead prefers to leave the canto with a mob of Scotts burning St. Mary's chapel in a rage, while the goblin-page, the Knight and the Lady flee the scene in a curiously lackadaisical denouement . Aside from a strategic, pointed use of Gothic description, the canto as a whole is largely descriptive, often needlessly so. The account of Melrose Abbey at the opening has long been popular ('For the gay beams of

lightsome day | Gild, but to flout, the ruins grey'), but the introduction of Margaret is couched in cloying and repetitive imagery:

The sun had brighten'd Cheviot grey,
The sun had brighten'd the Carter's side;
And soon beneath the rising day
Smiled Branksome Towers and Teviot's tide.
The wild birds told their warbling tale,
And waken'd every flower that blows;
And peeped forth the violet pale,
And spread her breast the mountain rose.
And lovelier than the rose so red,
Yet paler than the violet pale,
She early left her sleepless bed,
The fairest maid of Teviotdale. (ii.25.1-12)

When discussing Michael Scott the Last Minstrel – through the character of the Monk – carefully avoids bedevilling rhetoric:

to speak them were a deadly sin;
And for having but thought them my heart within,
A treble penance must be done. (ii.13.11-13)

However, when Deloraine takes the Mighty Book from the 'cold hand' of the dead wizard, Gothic terror ('He thought, as he took it, the dead man frown'd'), excess ('The night return'd

in double gloom') and multivocality ('Loud sobs, and laughter louder, ran, | And voices unlike the voice of man') unravel the Last Minstrel's song, which he now disowns ('I cannot tell how the truth may be; | I say the tale as 'twas said to me').

Canto Third opens with an emphatic continuation of the minstrel's notional rejection of pastoral love as ill-suited to his style: 'How could I to the dearest theme, | That ever warm'd a minstrel's dream', he says, 'So foul, so false a recreant prove!' He further acknowledges the ubiquitous dominance of love as a popular topic in 'the court, the camp, the grove'. Seemingly sharing this assumption, Lord Cranstoun 'pondering deep the tender scene' is interrupted by the goblin-page who 'shouted wild and shrill'. His appearance coincides with a noticeably grittier realism that distracts us from the abstract loveliness of pastoral: 'That warrior's steed, so dapple-gray, | Was dark with sweat, and splashed with clay'. Furthermore, the realism abruptly gives way to violent fantasy, a step further away from gentle nature writing: 'Their very coursers [...] snorted fire'. Cranstoun, facing Deloraine, becomes anxious, as indicated in the clunky repetitiveness of the description:

He sigh'd a sigh, and pray'd a prayer;
The prayer was to his patron saint,
The sigh was to his ladye fair. (iii.5.2-4)

Bombast returns to the text – 'The meeting of these champions proud | Seem'd like the bursting thunder-cloud' – in a manner reminiscent of Scott's efforts in Lewis's *Tales of Wonder*, specifically 'The Fire-King' ('His breath it was lightning, his voice it was storm'), or even *Fingal* (1762) and many other Ossian poems ('Lightning pours from their sides of steel'). Cranstoun nevertheless quickly defeats his foe with a delicate image in our minds: his lance pierced 'like silk, the Borderer's mail'. He asks his page to 'stanch the wound' – a phrase that

Scott tells us in the scholarly notes is taken from *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry* (1791) ('And with some kind of words he staunched the blood') and used on two more occasions in the *Lay* – thereby establishing his adherence to the chivalric code of the historical ballad. The goblin-page, seeing the Mighty Book, instead 'thought not to search or stanch the wound, | Until the secret he had found', thereby corrupting that code. The book, however, resists him:

The iron band, the iron clasp,
Resisted long the elfin grasp:
For when the first he had undone,
It closed as he the next begun.
Those iron clasps, that iron band,
Would not yield to unchristen'd hand,
Till he smear'd the cover o'er
With the Borderer's curdled gore;
A moment then the volume spread,
And one short spell therein he read,
It had much of glamour might;
Could make a ladye seem a knight; [...]
And youth seem age, and age seem youth—
All was delusion, nought was truth. (iii.9.1-18)

With this snatched spell the goblin-page is able to impersonate the young heir of Buccleuch, stolen by an English yeoman, who himself appears to be an inadvertent, or perhaps parodic, copy of Spenser's Redcrosse Knight, in appearance at least ('His coal-black hair, shorn round and close, | Set off his sun-burn'd face'). Meanwhile, it is the noble Ladye who successfully

attends to the injured Deloraine: ‘with a charm she stanch’d the blood’ (a more exact, legitimate borrowing from the 1791 poem). This seems to allow a pastoral love theme to re-enter Scott’s *Lay* as the Last Minstrel dwells at length, at this point, on fair Margaret alone in her turret. Whereas the gothicized goblin-page wrestles with the iron clasp of the book, in the case of Margaret we see

Her golden hair stream’d free from band,
Her fair cheek rested on her hand,
Her blue eyes sought the west afar,
For lovers love the western star. (iii.24.13-16)

However, Margaret is an experienced enough reader to know that ‘yon red glare’ in the sky is a beacon of impending death; and the warder also watching it ‘blazing strong’ duly ‘blew his war-note loud and long’. The rest of the canto looks ahead to the battle scene that makes up Canto Fourth. The song of war trumps the momentarily dominant song of love, just as it does in Percy’s *Hermit* (‘And deeds of arms and war became | The theme of every tongue’).

Canto Fourth of the *Lay* opens with a fond reminiscence of the days of battle long past:

The glaring bale-fires blaze no more;
No longer steel-clad warriors ride
Along thy wild and willow’d shore. (iv.1.2-4)

The lament takes a personal turn as the Last Minstrel remembers ‘The hour my brave, my only boy | Fell by the side of great Dundee’. Quickly dismissing the aside – ‘Enough—he died the death of fame’ – he refocuses our attention on the battle scene, or rather the details surrounding

it. After a lengthy catalogue of the knights involved, as well as a detailed account of the background of the disputes, in the thirty-fourth verse paragraph the Last Minstrel discusses the influence of Rattling Roaring Willie and ancient minstrelsy at large. He is fully aware of the expectations placed on war songs:

I know right well, that, in their lay,
Full many minstrels sing and say,
Such combat should be made on horse. (iv.34.1-3)

However, he openly refuses to follow their example:

Why should I tell the rigid doom,
That dragg'd my master to his tomb;
How Ousenam's maidens tore their hair,
Wept till their eyes were dead and dim,
And wrung their hands for love of him,
Who died at Jedwood Air?
He died!—his scholars, one by one,
To the cold silent grave are gone;
And I, alas! survive alone,
To muse o'er rivalries of yore,
And grieve that I shall hear no more
The strains, with envy heard before;
For, with my minstrel brethren fled,
My jealousy of song is dead. (iv.35.1-14)

Left alone, like Beattie's Minstrel or Gray's Bard, Scott's singer grieves for the lost songs that were forged in a competitive environment such as is described in Percy's *Hermit*:

The Minstrels of thy noble house,
All clad in robes of blue [...]
The great achievements of thy race
They sung [...].⁴²

Canto Fifth of the *Lay* extends the disquisition on the legacy of dead poets given in the previous canto with two contrasting verses. The first offers a conventional pastoral elegy in which nature mourns the poet who has praised it:

Call it not vain:—they do not err,
Who say, that when the Poet dies,
Mute Nature mourns her worshipper. (v.1.1-3)

Initially suggesting that 'mountains weep in crystal rill', the Last Minstrel curtails his claims with an emphatic 'Not that, in sooth, o'er mortal urn | Those things inanimate can mourn'. An isolated bard cut off from his creative community, he has free reign over genre.

Ill would it suit your gentle ear,

⁴² Thomas Percy, *The Hermit of Warkworth. A Northumberland Ballad* (London: T. Davies, 1771), p. 20.

Ye lovely listeners, to hear
How to the axe the helms did sound,
And blood pour'd down from many a wound; [...]
But, were each dame a listening knight,
I well could tell how warriors fight! (v.21.1-13)

Despite claiming that he won't focus on the fight between 'Deloraine' (who, in fact, is Cranstoun in disguise) and Richard of Musgrave, he is compelled to give in miniature the lurid highlights using the present tense:

'Tis done, 'tis done! that fatal blow
Has stretch'd him on the bloody plain;
He strives to rise—Brave Musgrave, no!
Thence never shalt thou rise again!
He chokes in blood! (v.22.1-5)

Canto Fifth certainly rounds off the story of the poem, from one perspective at least. Towards the end, in the twenty-seventh verse paragraph, Scott inserts a plot summary ('[...] as they left the listed plain, | Much of the story she did gain'), though Cranstoun, so the Last Minstrel observes, 'half his tale [...] left unsaid'. As the author of his own narrative, the baron naturally turns it into a martial song that celebrates his achievements, downplaying the goblin-page's wild, 'romantic' intentions:

How Cranstoun fought with Deloraine,
And of his page, and of the Book

Which from the wounded knight he took;
And how he sought her castle high,
That morn, by help of gramarye;
How, in Sir William's armour dight,
Stolen by his page, while slept the knight
He took on him the single fight. (v.27.3-10)

The Ladye, meanwhile, suppresses the fantastical elements of her own story – ‘Cared not the Ladye to betray | Her mystic arts in view of day’ – and even plots to close it off:

But well she thought, ere midnight came,
Of that strange page the pride to tame,
From his foul hands the Book to save,
And send it back to Michael's grave.— (v.27.15-18)

At the demarcating long dash the minstrel refers to another unfinished story, that is the declaration, with regards to Margaret and Cranstoun, that he ‘Needs not these lovers’ joys to tell: | One day, fair maids, you’ll know them well’. Here, the narrator and the lady have dismissed from the *Lay* supernatural and pastoral balladry, though the latter is retained for a possible spin-off. Even though this would be a satisfying conclusion, in the context of Scott’s attempts to stabilize his form, three further verse paragraphs and a framing section follow.

Deloraine suddenly awakens ‘from his deathlike trance’ in a paragraph that largely comprises rapid-fire couplets (‘Hence, to the field unarm’d, he ran, | And hence his presence scared the clan’), before it winds into a quick but poignant lament shaped by a rhyming quatrain and a faintly rhyming, unobtrusive couplet:

And so 'twas seen of him, e'en now,
When on dead Musgrave he look'd down;
Grief darken'd on his rugged brow,
Though half disguised with a frown;
And thus, while sorrow bent his head,
His foeman's epitaph he made. (v.28.22-27)

His epitaphic interjection occupies the ensuing verse paragraph. Similar in form to the previous sections, its prosody is noticeably clunky and the sounds sloppy and sluggish: 'if I slew thy brother dear, | Thou slew'st a sister's son to me'. Largely favouring elegantly end-stopped lines in this canto and elsewhere, here Scott's speaker delivers stalling lines with needless syntactic interruptions:

long months three,
Till ransom'd for a thousand mark,
Dark Musgrave, it was long of thee. (v.29.6-8)

A borrowing from Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (1612) – 'The lands, that over Ouse to Berwick forth do bear, | Have for their blazon had, the snaffle, spur, and spear' – seems oddly forced in the middle of Deloraine's triplet:

In all the northern counties here,
Whose word is Snaffle, spur, and spear,
Thou wert the best to follow gear! (v.29.15-18)

After Deloraine's lament for his fallen foe, the Last Minstrel, in the next verse paragraph, closes Musgrave's story by having Lord Dacre's men carry his body away in a suitably militaristic manner:

And laid him on his bloody shield;
On levell'd lances, four and four,
By turns, the noble burden bore. (v.30.4-6)

Another minstrel (within the story) delivers a 'plaintive wail', which is followed by a requiem sung 'for the warrior's soul' by four priests and, finally, an escorted journey to Leven's shore, where the body is laid in his father's grave. Although this offers yet another neat ending to the canto, Scott (or an authoritative poet figure of some kind, at least) interrupts with what amounts to a blurred extension of the Last Minstrel's conclusion:

The harp's wild notes, though hush'd the song,
The mimic march of death prolong;
Now seems it far, and now a-near,
Now meets, and now eludes the ear;
Now seems some mountain side to sweep,
Now faintly dies in valley deep;
Seems now as if the Minstrel's wail,
Now the sad requiem, loads the gale;
Last, o'er the warrior's closing grave,
Rung the full choir in choral stave. (v, Conclusion, 1-10)

Above all of his self-sabotaging attempts, it is this inconclusive, prolonging insertion that finally unsettles the Last Minstrel's lay, placing it far and near, at the mountainside and in the valley, in the wind and over the grave, in ever-shifting levels of audibleness. It is left to the three now-dead sixteenth-century singers of the sixth canto to bring minstrelsy back to the fore.

The Extraneous Canto

'The sixth canto is altogether redundant', Scott confessed, 'for the poem should certainly have closed with the union of the lovers, when the interest, if any, was at an end. But what could I do? I had my book and my page still on my hands, and must get rid of them at all events'.⁴³ To be sure, the subject of Canto Sixth, a feast to celebrate the marriage of Margaret and Cranstoun, is both an extension of the seemingly concluded story of the previous cantos (the union of two families in the face of external challenges) and a rerun of earlier formal and generic disruptions. Read in the context of a meta-minstrelsy, needless to say, this so-called 'extra canto' finally defeats the wild writing that Scott sought to overturn in his recent collection of *Minstrelsy*, and champions, under pressure, his ideal of collaborative creation and improvisatory recreation. The wedding feast is honoured by three very different and seemingly incidental songs by Albert Graeme, a border minstrel; Fitztraver, a courtly poet; and Harold of St Clair, an Orcadian bard. As Scott states in his note to the eleventh verse paragraph, Graeme's 'simple song' in ballad quatrains reworks an old Scottish song, which begins:

She lean'd her back against a thorn,

⁴³ *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by H. J. C. Grierson, 12 vols (London: Constable, 1932-37), I, pp. 242-43.

The sun shines fair on Carlisle wa':
And there she has her young babe born,
And the lyon shall be lord of a'.⁴⁴

Graeme Anglicizes (that is, linguistically 'stabilizes') this stanza, and foregrounds a marital – and national – union in keeping with the occasion:

It was an English ladye bright,
(The sun shines fair on Carlisle wall,)
And she would marry a Scottish knight,
For Love will still be Lord of all. (vi.11.1-4)

Ostensibly a call for peace in the Borders, Graeme's song is quickly marred by tragedy as the bride's brother poisons her: 'That wine she had not tasted well, [...] | When dead, in her true love's arms, she fell'. Read on its own, the ballad looks fundamentally conventional in its form and theme. Canto Sixth at large opens with an anatomy of Border minstrelsy: for one, it is inspired by the wildness of the terrain ('O Caledonia! stern and wild, | Meet nurse for a poetic child!'). War and love are interrelated, even interchangeable themes ('Whisper'd young knights, in tone more mild, | To ladies fair'), as Scott also suggested in the opening of his earlier ballad, 'The Fire-King': 'Bold knights and fair dames, to my harp give an ear, | Of love, and of war, and of wonder to hear'.⁴⁵ But, contextually, Graeme's song comes at the Dame's request

⁴⁴ Scott, *Poetical Works*, VI, p. 197.

⁴⁵ Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Tales of Wonder*, ed. by Douglass H. Thomson (Ontario: Broadview, 2010), pp. 92-97.

in response to the ill-behaviour of the goblin-page, whom we have come to identify with the wild imagination. Before Graeme steps forth, the ‘wily page, with vengeful thought’ molests the guests with ‘bitter gibe and taunting jest’, causing a riot in the hall, before cowering in a dark nook, grinning and muttering ‘Lost! lost! lost!’ Seemingly defeated – temporarily, at least – the page’s actions introduce violence into the hall (‘With bodkin pierced him to the bone’) repeated in the song (‘He pierced her brother to the heart’). In Graeme’s version, importantly, the Knight, having by rights killed the murderous brother, dies off-page during the Crusades in Palestine for the sake of his bride, returning us to the minstrels’ song in Percy’s *Hermit*, where Lord William

gain’d a fair young Saxon bride

With all her lands and towers.

Then journeying to the Holy Land,

There bravely fought and dy’d.⁴⁶

Chivalry can still shape the triumphant message of Graeme’s song, in spite of the disruption going on around the minstrel.

The second singer, Fitztraver (‘a bard of loftier port’), extends the chivalric theme in a seemingly more sophisticated measure. Heralded as Lord William’s ‘foremost favourite [...] | And chief of all his minstrelsy’, Fitztraver has frequently collaborated with the ‘gentle’ Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey and a respected real-life poet. Framing his tale in neatly knit Spenserian stanzas, albeit with a noticeably high number of trochaic and anapaestic inversions,

⁴⁶ Percy, p. 21.

Fitztraver is inspired by Surrey's 'raptured line' that conjures forth 'That fair and lovely form, the Ladye Geraldine'. But, references to Surrey and Spenser aside, it is the modern bard Coleridge that really haunts this song: Scott's imagery, like that seen in *Christabel* and elsewhere, is atmospherically vague ('Cloudy and indistinct, as feverish dream'), and his lines, again like those in Coleridge's poem, build up internal repetition for a vivid visual effect ('And part by moonshine pale, and part was hid in gloom'). Scott's Geraldine is certainly closer to Coleridge's Geraldine than to Surrey's. Although feted in some circles as worthy rivals to the ultimate poetic couple, Petrarch and Laura, Surrey only wrote one piece that was certainly in the honour of his 'Geraldine' (Elizabeth Fitzgerald): a pleasing, praising sonnet ('Her beauty of kinde, her vertues from above, | Happy is her, that can obtaine her love'). In Coleridge's poem *Christabel* rescues 'fair Geraldine', whom she discovers had been attacked by five unnamed warriors. Wearied on their subsequent journey, the women lay down to sleep, at which point (the abrupt conclusion to Part I) *Christabel* catches a glimpse of Geraldine's bosom and half her side, which is evasively described as a 'sight to dream of, not to tell!', the 'mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow'. A hundred or so lines into Part II, by which time Sir Leoline has declared he will avenge his daughter's new friend, *Christabel* again shudders at the sight of Geraldine's body: 'Again she saw that bosom old, | Again she felt that bosom cold'. This and a later, more revealing glimpse, some 583 lines into the poem, level a psychological terror at the form of Geraldine:

A snake's small eye blinks dull and shy,
 And the lady's eyes they shrunk in her head [...]
 At *Christabel* she looked askance! –

One moment – and the sight was fled! (583-88)⁴⁷

In the *Lay* the Fitztraver's song covers forty-five taut lines and therefore cuts well short of Coleridge's slow reveal of the false lady's true nature. But readers of both poems, after 1816, might have picked up on a similar sense of impending threat in the knowing sexualisation of Scott's outwardly coy description of the vision of his Geraldine: 'O'er her white bosom stray'd her hazel hair, | Pale her dear cheek, as if for love she pined'. Whereas Coleridge's poem ends with Sir Leoline, mesmerized, abandoning his daughter for the bewitching lady, Scott's much more rushed song ends in sudden violence – the sort of violence Geraldine claims to have evaded in *Christabel* – 'The gory bridal bed, the plunder'd shrine, | The murder'd Surrey's blood, the tears of Geraldine!'. The charming sacrifice of the doomed Knight in Graeme's ballad has given way to the 'wild caprice' and murderousness we associate with the goblin-page. The hitherto courtly Fitztraver has passively imitated – or unconsciously plagiarized, to use Dorothy Wordsworth's phrase – the goblin-page, a beguiling impersonator like Coleridge's Geraldine, as he recomposes his song in response to the terrors around him.⁴⁸

By the time we hear the third song, a 'secret horror' has taken over the feast as the goblin-page has 'Found! found! found!' what he has been looking for: the resurrected wizard Michael Scott. Seemingly oblivious, Harold of St Clair, an Orcadian bard weaves a tale of love, a major theme of Border minstrelsy as understood by Scott, and pointedly rejects the theme of

⁴⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 203.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of 'passive imitation' in *Christabel* and other poems see Tilar J. Mazzeo's *Plagiarism and Literary Property in the Romantic Period* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 27-35.

war as inappropriate for his audience: ‘No haughty feat of arms I tell; | Soft is the note, and sad the lay’. At the outset we learn that the dirge mourns Rosabelle who, we discover at the end, has drowned. Marked by death, the poem is filled with supernatural or, at the very least, eerie imagery:

Seem’d all on fire within, around,
Deep sacristy and altar’s pale;
Shone ever pillar foliage-bound,
And glimmer’d all the dead men’s mail. (vi.23.36-39)

Harold’s poised song in praise of the noble family members buried with ‘candle, with book, and with knell’ jars with the creeping dread that ‘chill’d the soul of every guest’ at the feast itself. Reality becomes far more fantastical than the minstrelsy that punctuates it as, ‘Then sudden, through the darken’d air | A flash of lightning came’. Scott noticeably quickens the pace of the writing, baldly invokes Spenser (‘levin-brand’, *lightning*), mixes short (‘flash’d’) and long sounds (‘smouldering’), and uses repetition to enact a feeling of puckish villainy as it expands ‘on the elvish page’ (meaning both the goblin-page and the scandalized page in our hands):

So broad, so bright, so red the glare,
The castle seem’d on flame.
Glanced every rafter of the hall,
Glanced every shield upon the wall;
Each trophied beam, each sculptured stone,
Were instant seen, and instant gone;

Full through the guests' bedazzled band
Resistless flash'd the levin-brand,
And fill'd the hall with smouldering smoke,
As on the elvish page it broke. (vi.25.3-12)

The vividness of this verse paragraph unravels in the ensuing one, where the guests at the feast perceive the scene before them in starkly different ways: 'Some saw an arm, and some a hand, | And some the waving of a gown'. Although rendered 'speechless, ghastly, wan', Deloraine becomes our surrogate storyteller as he attempts to articulate for 'the anxious crowd' who 'trembling heard the wondrous tale' of the ghostly vision before him:

At length, by fits, he darkly told,
With broken hint, and shuddering cold—
That he had seen, right certainly,
A shape with amice wrapp'd around,
With a wrought Spanish baldric bound,
Like pilgrim from beyond the sea;
And knew—but how it matter'd not—
It was the wizard, Michael Scott. (vi.26.18-25)

In response the listeners turn to new authority figures, in prayers to various saints and blessed patrons, and the happy ending wrought by the wedding has been firmly overwritten ('twere vain | To wake the note of mirth again'). This is in turn followed by a communal 'Hymn for the Dead' sung by the holy fathers, at the close of the Last Minstrel's downbeat lay. But the larger poem does not end there. Rather, Scott provides an extensive epilogue in which

we learn of the Minstrel's post-*Lay* life. Fled is the supernatural imagination that frightened the courtly eyes and ears. Instead, the old tales of chivalry find an audience of stray guests who, so we're told, delight in the unending storytelling of the newly established poet in residence:

The aged Harper's soul awoke!
Then would he sing achievements high,
And circumstance of chivalry,
Till the rapt traveller would stay,
Forgetful of the closing day. (vi, Conclusion, 21-25)

The unending lay was continued – or simply written again, according to Jeffrey – when Scott turned his hand to *Marmion* (1808). After that, parodies by younger contemporaries, James Kirke Paulding's *The Lay of the Scottish Fiddle* (1813) and John Roby's *The Lay of the Poor Fiddler* (1814), picked over Scott's material, returning it to the marketplace in a mocking mixture of dialects and stanza forms. By then, a sort of minstrel fatigue had crept into mainstream poetry. In *The Excursion* (1814), Wordsworth's Pastor, for one, rails against the declining art of improvisatory minstrelsy ('Listen who would, be wrought upon who might, | Sincerely wretched hearts, or falsely gay'). But the *Lay*, meanwhile, reached its fifteenth edition in 1816, a little over a decade since its first publication. When they fell out of copyright in the 1830s, attractively rebound editions of Scott's long poems appeared at affordable prices for diverse readerships: if you looked in the right bookshops in 1839 you could still buy the *Lay*, *The Lady of the Lake*, and *Marmion* for less than a shilling apiece.